

Preparing for a Media Interview

Preparation - Confidence, Control and Credibility

- Define your agenda. Clarify your communication objective(s).
- Determine how the interview might offer you the chance to make positive points or provide helpful information about your topic/issue/organization.
- Write down and practice key message points in brief statements or bullet points.
- Remove jargon or long explanations.
- Have back up data to support your points if appropriate. Review facts and figure so you are comfortable discussing them.
- Anticipate questions (easy, hard and terrible) and your responses. Practice with a colleague or in front of the mirror (yes, it looks silly, but heck, it is worth it!) Are you planning to talk about the same thing the reporter expects to discuss?
- Get to know the media outlet -- what type of publication or program is it? Who is their target audience? What other media outlet is covering the story?
- What is the interview format? Length? Live? Taped? Solo or multi-guests?
- If you are part of a group, make sure everyone has the same message!
- If you are meeting with more than one media outlet, make sure your message is consistent with each reporter.

Interview Confirmation

- The day before your interview confirm date, time, place and anticipated length of interview.

Arrival, Location and Pre-Interview

- Allow plenty of time for the unexpected (no parking space, traffic, floods...)
- Arrive at the media outlet 5-10 minutes early. Expect to wait!
- If interview is at your office, be prepared early and have all calls and interruptions held.
- If the interview is in your office, tidy up. Put away piles of papers and clutter.
- Try not to be interviewed behind your desk as it creates a barrier between you and the reporter.
- Pre-interviews - some reporters spend up to 30 minutes prior to an interview warming up the subject. Some spend 5 seconds! Take the opportunity to find out what the reporter is looking for and set the tone for the interview.
- Do ask when a story or article is going to be run.
- Don't ask to pre-approve a story.

General Tools, Techniques and Tips

The goal of an interview is to communicate your key message to a public via the report and his/her media outlet. It is not to educate the reporter or show how much you know. The key then is to focus on your key message and utilize techniques to keep the interview on those messages. Here are some tried-and-true interview techniques.

Bridging

You will often be asked questions that don't get to the points you wish to make or that you don't wish to answer. You can use bridging to turn the question to your points. Listen for the larger issue behind the question and find the connection to your issue. Here are some examples:

"...yes, but that speaks to a bigger point...."

"... I think what you are really asking is..."

Blocking

Sometimes a reporter asks you a question you don't want to answer. If it is a policy issue not to discuss certain issues, it is fair to say "It's our policy not to discuss XYZ..." and then bridge on to what you *want* to talk about. But if you can't answer a question, explain why. No comment works for the White House, but not for most of the world.

A= Q + 1

A simple and effective way to have every question become an opportunity to make your point is to try and answer a question with a very brief answer then and one of your key messages. This also allows you to repeat a few key messages.

" (short answer to question) which supports our goal of"

Flagging or Headlining

When trying to make your key messages clear quickly in an interview, you start with the conclusions and end with the explanations -- you "flag" or "headline" the issue. This is especially important for broadcast interviews. You can simply make your point and then explain it, or you can draw attention by saying phrases such as:

"The most important issue/fact is...."

"What we really want to make clear is that"

Enumerating Points

When you have a complicated message in a broadcast interview, you can carefully extend the sound byte by enumerating your points, making it difficult for the media outlet to separate them. For example:

"There are three things every person planning a pregnancy should know: 1) take folic acid prior to trying to conceive, 2) abstain from drugs and alcohol and 3) talk to your doctor."

Pauses/Quiet/Knowing When to Stop!

- Don't continue talking after you make your point.
- Use single, clear sentences to make your point.
- Reporters often leave a space of silence to try and draw unintended remarks out of guests trying to "fill the space." You don't have to!

Avoid Getting Trapped

- Keep calm. Leave pig wrestling to the pigs. They always end up looking like pigs...

- Don't repeat wrong information -- even if offered by the reporter. It could be the sound bite that is used. Instead offer the correction framed not as a denial, but as a statement about the facts you want to present.
- If a reporter provides incorrect information, it is ok to correct them with "That is not true... the facts are that...."
- If you don't have or know the information requested, don't pretend you do. Offer to get back to the reporter with the information.
- Never say something you don't want to appear in print or be aired.
- Don't go "off the record" unless you have good reason to trust the reporter. Some say there is no real "off the record."
- If you make an error, correct yourself as soon as possible.

Body Language During Interviews

Eye Contact

- Make eye contact with the reporter. If on camera, don't stare at the camera..
- If you are being interviewed at a remote location and the interviewer is in the studio or somewhere else, DO look straight into the camera.
- Don't be distracted by activity around you.

Posture

- Sit up straight but not like a stick! It helps to keep your feet on the floor.
- If you have a choice, decline to be interviewed while sitting on a couch. It is hard to sit up straight and you are often lower than your interviewer.
- Don't fidget. If standing, put one foot slightly in front of the other to avoid swaying.
- Find a place to rest your hands and keep them there -- folded in your lap works...
- Use gestures sparingly and naturally.
- Watch the nodding. Women tend to nod to acknowledge the reporter's comments or questions, but it may be interpreted as agreement.

Wrapping it Up

- Leave time for questions.
- At the end of the interview, recap any commitments to get the reporter additional information and tell them when they can expect you to get back to them.
- Leave behind your press materials. Make sure they include your contact information for follow up questions.
- If you are not doing a live show, ask when the piece will run or air. If there were no plans to run a story before the interview, ask if the reporter plans to write a story.
- Follow up on any materials or information you promise in a timely manner.

Print Tips

- Some print reporters record their interviews. Be prepared to have your exact phrase transcribed. At the same time, be prepared to have in *incorrectly* transcribed!

Broadcast Tips in General

- Raise your voice slightly for key points and emphasis.
- Watch getting high pitched and "screechy" if you are the excitable type!
- Ask reporter what they like to be called and call them by that name. First name basis can be helpful.

Radio/Podcasting Tips

- Use your voice to create variety and interest -- no monotones.
- Feel free to have notes of key points, facts, etc.
- Paint a word picture. Remember that old adage, "see it on the radio." Use examples and stories to "illustrate" your point.
- Call-Ins: don't let angry or hostile callers fluster you. Always take the high road.
- Avoid ums, ahs and "verbal nodding" -- it sounds silly on radio

TV Tips

- Dress appropriately. Mostly that means dress conservatively, but there are exceptions. Avoid short skirts, white shirts or loud ties if you are trying to come across as credible. Solid, dark colors work well.
- Men button coats if standing, unbutton if sitting.
- Studios are cold with the lights off -- ovens with the lights are on. Dress in mid-weight clothing.
- Avoid shiny or dangly jewelry. Watch for jewelry banging against lavalier mikes.
- If you have the choice, choose contacts over glasses
- If offered makeup, accept it. Men, 5 o'clock shadows show. Women, makeup should be only slightly heavier than normally worn.

Phone Tips

- When called without prior notice, find out if the reporter is on deadline. If they are not, ask if you can call them back. Set an acceptable time to allow yourself to prepare. Even 5 minutes can help improve your delivery.
- Try and call from a quiet place or in a room where you can close the door. Outside noises can disturb the interview and are especially problematic when the interview is being recorded.
- Use your notes -- no one is watching!!
- Ask the reporter for feedback to ensure they understand you. With no eye contact or body language, this can prevent misunderstanding.

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